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Soviet Press Tells of Spies, All American

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MOSCOW, Aug. 22 — Suddenly the Soviet press was full of American spies. No sooner had television concluded a widely watched 10-part series pitting the K.G.B. against the C.I.A. than the newspapers weighed in with a spate of exposés.

It was not clear what prompted the attention the press was giving to espionage, beyond the poor state of Soviet-American relations and the periodic Soviet practice of reminding citizens of the dangers of dealing with foreigners.

Moskovskaya Pravda, the party newspaper for the Moscow area, said this month:

"It seems that never before has the squall of lies and slander, of ideological diversions and filthy political provocations against socialist countries, against the U.S.S.R., been so fierce and hysterical."

The polemics heated further later over President Reagan's inadvertently taped quip about bombing and outlawing Russia. An official Government statement called it "unprecedentedly hostile," dangerous and worse, and the press picked up the theme with a chorus of indignation that spilled over onto the Republican convention and its platform.

U.S. Warns Tourists

In a counterpoint to the Soviet charges, the State Department recently issued an unusual travel advisory warning tourists of an increase in harassment of Americans in Leningrad. The Soviet Union countered by charging that the Government was trying to frighten American tourists away.

American diplomats said the travel advisory was issued after a dozen incidents in which Americans were either detained or searched, usually when they tried to visit Jewish dissidents. But much of the dispute was about American assertions that a Marine consulate guard was beaten and detained by the police in the middle of the night. The Russians said he had been drunk and disorderly.

The television series, called "Tass Is Authorized to State . . .," after the formula that precedes high-level announcements, drew what was probably one of the largest viewing audiences in the Soviet Union. The usual lines of shoppers vanished by 8 P.M., when it went on the air.

The series ended with an American agent, caught in the act, pleading, "Let me go, I am an American diplomat."

It seemed hardly coincidental that the series was broadcast when the Olympic Games in Los Angeles would have been televised if Soviet athletes had participated. Instead, viewers got a show that underscored the excuse given for not going to Los Angeles — the dangers that athletes would purportedly have faced there.

The day after the television series ended, three newspapers picked up the espionage theme. The trade-union daily Trud described how Louis Thomas, a diplomat expelled last year, was said to have tried to reactivate a Byelorussian who had been recruited abroad by the Central Intelligence Agency but repented on returning to the Soviet Union.

The article was accompanied by a collage of photographs showing spy equipment purportedly concealed in a paving stone and diagrams meant to direct agents to the stone.

Warning to Readers

The newspaper Sovetskaya Rossiya carried a documentary-style article on how the United States gathers intelligence in the Soviet Union. The author, F. Sergeyev, said the State Department gathered 40 to 60 percent of its information from the "personal observations of its diplomat-spies, accompanied, as a rule, by close reading of the press."

Mr. Sergeyev, . . . were the most prominent practitioners of what he termed "legal espionage," followed by correspondents, tourists, official delegations, businessmen "and, finally, American specialists, graduate students, students and sailors."

In short, Mr. Sergeyev said, virtually every American visitor is suspect. But like the other authors he assured his readers that none of the spies go undetected.

"All efforts to snoop on us through the keyhole have been broken up, as undoubtedly all future efforts will be," he said.

The purpose seemed not so much to assure readers as to put them on notice that the K.G.B. was watching the movements of foreigners and that Russians had been cautioned to stay clear of them.

A Joke Loses Its Humor

Such warnings are a periodic fixture in the press, though the current campaign seemed more forceful than those of the past. Given the Russians' inherent suspiciousness of foreigners, the periodic reminders seem almost redundant.

Among sophisticated Muscovites, the campaign seemed to have relatively little impact except as a reminder of the dangers inherent in meeting with foreigners.

A woman who accepted a ride from an American correspondent in his car treated the warnings as a joke.

"Since you are a correspondent," she said, "I cannot tell you what kind of work my husband does, but why don't you come up for a cup of coffee anyway?"

In the provinces, the message seems to have taken hold. Two American correspondents driving to Leningrad stopped to chat with a peasant who thought he could provoke a rich guffaw with the line, "I know, you are American correspondents."

His smile vanished when he learned he was right.